



YVONNE BARLOW

RETROSPECTIVE: A LIFETIME OF PAINTING FROM 1950-



French Village
size: 19 x 19"
medium: Oil on Board

KEEPING A SECRET *by John Berger*

Her life's work is made up of several distinct phases, yet there is also a remarkable consistency not of vocabulary but of intention.

There's a painting called Crab Apple Tree. She painted this tree, which existed and still exists, a number of times. And each time she transforms it, coaxes it into becoming a tree of secrets. The secrets are contained in the colours and the trails of those colours which hang from the tree like fruit.

And it seems to me that throughout her life the colours she mixes on her palette and then applies to a canvas or hardboard are the 'wrappings', the cover of secrets.

Mysteries, if you wish. But mysteries often lend themselves to mystification and vagueness, whereas secrets are clenched and hard. Secrets are undeclared facts. If you write down a secret, it's no longer one. If, however, you paint it, the secret is declared but kept. You see the event and you ask: What exactly is happening? And you start wondering and the painting leads you on because it is wordless but not blind.

The secrets she has painted touch upon many different fields of observation and experience. In the strata paintings the secret is a geological one, a secret kept by the tectonic plates. In the falling bird series, the secret is that of how flight unfolds. In the forest encounter scenes the secrets concern human will. Before the boat images we face some of the secrets of the sea. There's a portrait of a horse where the single secret answers the question: what does a horse know?



There have of course been other secretive painters. Piero di Cosimo, with his eccentric passion for animals, immediately comes to mind, and I know that his *Satyr Mourning over a Nymph* has been one of her favourite paintings since she was a student. Or Magritte. Or Wilfredo Lam.

As a context for his secrets Piero di Cosimo used Greek mythology, Magritte used Freudian psychology and surrealism, Wilfredo Lam used the masterpieces of Totemic art; what does she use?

My hunch is she has used a special feature of femininity: she has closely observed a male world which, because she is a woman, forgot she was a witness. And in this as a painter she joins Virginia Woolf as a writer. Yvonne Barlow's secrets await discovery.



John Berger is an English art critic, novelist, painter and author. His novel G. won the 1972 Booker Prize, and his essay on art criticism "Ways of Seeing", originally written as an accompaniment to a BBC series, is often used as a university text. He is also a friend and colleague of Yvonne Barlow.

Blowing Curtain 1963

size: 23 x 33"

medium: Oil on Board





Blue Sea and Bird 1966

size: 36 x 48"

medium: Oil on Board



Falling Bird and Sea 1966

size: 28 x 37"

medium: Oil on Board



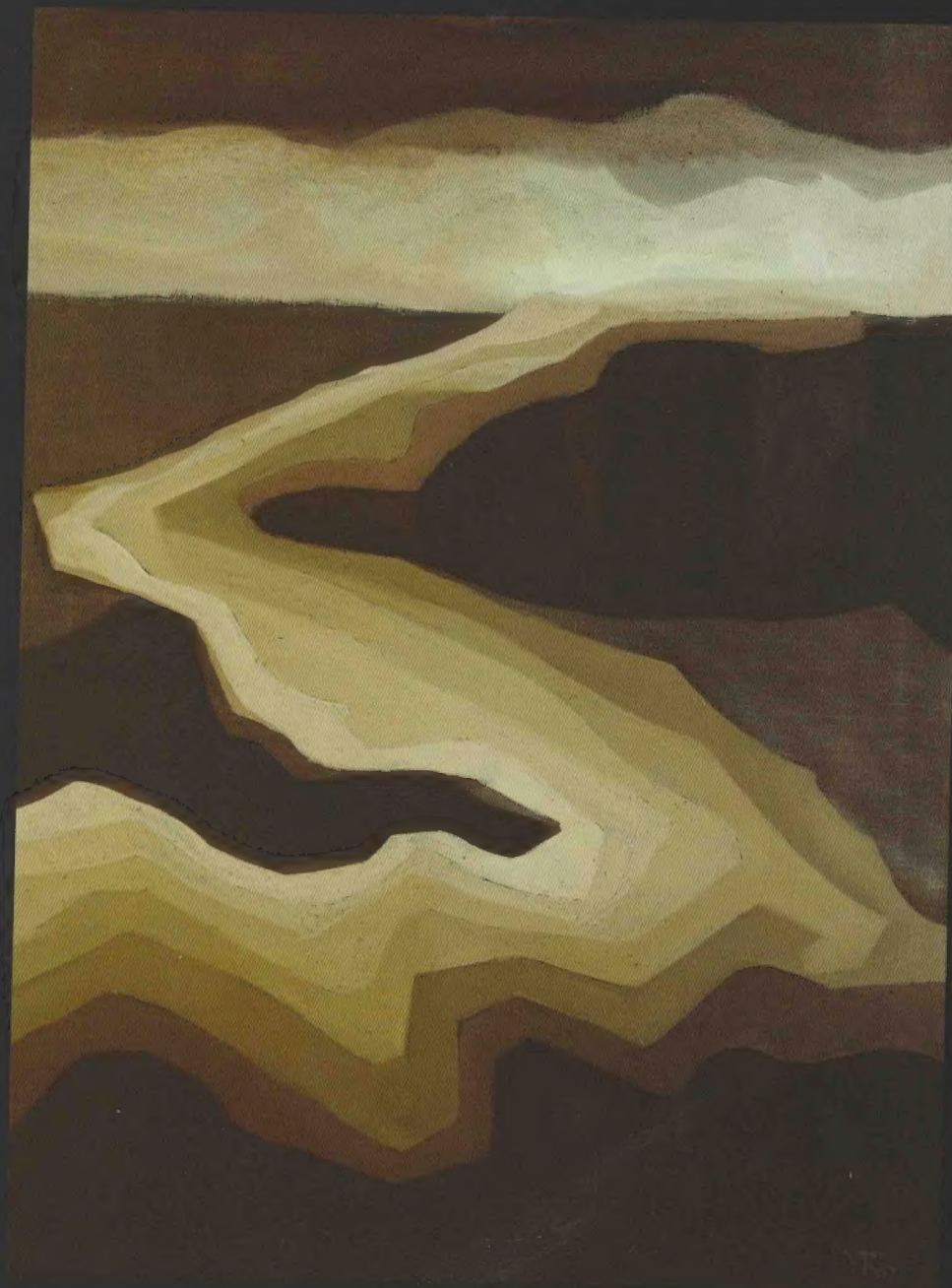
Coastal Linescape 1963

size: 23 x 33"

medium: Oil on Board



Linescape 1963
size: 23 x 33"
medium: Oil on Board



Cliff Paths 1969

size: 30 x 40"

medium: Oil on Canvas



Mountains 1978

size: 24 x 18"

medium: Oil on Board



Last Light 1972
size: 28 x 36"
medium: Oil on Canvas



Ascension 1981
size: 69 x 96"
medium: Oil on Canvas



Cityscape 1972
size: 20 x 30"
medium: Oil on Canvas



The Gate House 1978

size: 24 x 18"

medium: Oil on Canvas

Crab Apple Tree 1981

size: 30 x 48"

medium: Oil on Board





Mountain Wrestlers 1983

size: 20 x 24"

medium: Oil on Canvas



Night Wrestlers 1983

size: 20 x 30"

medium: Oil on Board



Red Wrestlers 1982

size: 24 x 18"

medium: Oil on Canvas



The Hunt 1987

size: 48 x 36"

medium: Oil on Canvas



The Watchers 1991

size: 24 x 18"

medium: Oil on Canvas



Friend or Foe? 1987

size: 48 x 36"

medium: Oil on Canvas



Red Encounters 1991

size: 36 x 24"

medium: Oil on Board



Forest Rescue 1986

size: 10 x 7"

medium: Oil on Canvas



The Plot 1988

size: 36 x 24"

medium: Oil on Board



Unexpected Encounter 1989

size: 48 x 36"

medium: Oil on Canvas



Riders in the Snow 1992

size: 24 x 18"

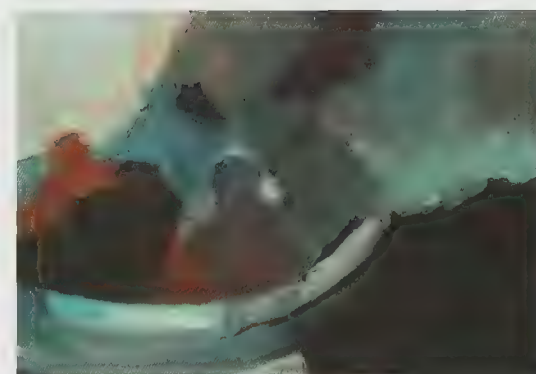
medium: Oil on Canvas



Homeward Bound 1994

size: 24 x 18"

medium: Oil on Board



At Sea

size: 8 x 11.5"

medium: Oil on Board



Rough Seas 1993
size: 60 x 40"
medium: Oil on Canvas

BIOGRAPHY

Yvonne was born in Muswell Hill, North London in 1924, the youngest of five children in a household where finances were very constrained. Having always been interested in the arts and music, Yvonne won a scholarship to study at the Central School of Art. All the London art schools at that time had been evacuated to Northampton, sharing premises with Northampton Art School. The art schools returned to London two years before the end of war, though London was still under attack from various bombs. Yvonne lived in a shared flat in Lambs Conduit Street, opposite The Lamb pub. Everything was very basic - electricity had only just been installed, the cooker was on the landing, and a shared lavatory and sink on the next landing down. Many of the students at the Central School rented rooms in the area including Robert Addington and John Drummond, with whom Yvonne is still in close contact. John Berger, another friend from that time, lived a bit further away. Yvonne and her friends took their work very seriously, taking every opportunity to paint and draw and attending evening classes as well as their day classes. They played hard as well, and The Lamb became a popular meeting-place - cider was 4d a glass.

No paintings of Yvonne's remain from that time. They were either given away as presents or sold to a man in Soho. As a student on a grant, Yvonne was only allowed three or four canvases per year, so Yvonne and students like her had to over-paint their work. Yvonne always carried a sketchbook, pen and a bottle of ink wherever she went however only one sketch book survives from this period. She sketched people in the street, museums and shops. Yvonne was at that time particularly influenced by Cezanne, Lautrec, Goya and Rembrandt.

Yvonne was on the Art Teacher's Diploma course which consisted of three years at art school followed by a year at university. The art school course was thoroughly comprehensive: students studied and took exams in anatomy, architecture, perspective, history of art, composition and life drawing. The year at London University was divided between teaching practice and lectures on topics which included educational psychology. Her teaching practice was at a boys' Grammar school, where she was the only woman apart from the secretary. This caused a lot of interest: sketches appeared on blackboards of Miss Tanner in Tights. After qualification, Yvonne worked for a social research organisation called Mass Observation for about a year, helping to study and record the everyday lives of ordinary people in Britain. She then took a job teaching art at a school for deprived children in Vauxhall. She had a nine month break to paint and draw in Sicily, but continued to work at the school until marrying Andrew Barlow in 1952.

Yvonne had got to know Andrew, his brother Horace and Pat Merton in dramatic circumstances when Yvonne's flatmate had killed herself and Pat saw the police car outside the house. Yvonne moved into the young doctors' digs in Mecklenburgh Square in the former premises of the Hogarth

Press and she stayed with them for a while. It was an eccentric household, Yvonne once found Pat scrubbing a leg of lamb with Daz: the bluebottles had got at it, so he was cleaning it up before popping it in the oven.

Yvonne and Andrew married in 1952, he was a descendent of Charles Darwin and came from a very different sort of family and background to Yvonne. Their first child, Martin was born in 1953, very asthmatic and dangerously ill for much of his early childhood this absorbed most of Yvonne's energy for some years. Andrew and Yvonne's daughter, Claire, was born in 1954, she was a bonny child and much less trouble. Though there are few paintings from this time, Yvonne did have a painting room in the house. In 1963 she rented a studio first at 295 Portobello Road, then in Golbourne Road, which saw most of her work.

Yvonne's first solo exhibition was in 1964 at the Upper Grosvenor Gallery. At the last moment, they included some of Yvonne's 'Pillage' paintings, which attracted immediate media attention. The works were light-hearted collages of unused drugs which patients had returned to the hospital, and which Andrew had brought home for her. Titles for two of them were 'Purple hearts' and 'A bouquet for matron'.

The family's Scottish connection began with a holiday on the island of Soay, off the Isle of Skye, in the early '60s. Yvonne was captivated by the place and in the late 1960s Andrew and Yvonne bought Inch Kenneth – rather by accident. Toying with the idea of buying a house in the country, they were sent the brochure for Inch Kenneth, which was being sold by Jessica Mitford. Andrew had a few days holiday, so all the family went up to Scotland to view it. The first visit was awful: the crossing to Inch Kenneth was miserably rough and wet, the house was damp and dismal, with all the furniture wrapped in dust sheets. However, the next day was gloriously sunny; Yvonne met by chance the farmer's wife from Inch Kenneth, and asked whether there might be another opportunity to visit. They spent a lovely day there though they didn't go near the house. Andrew and Yvonne decided to put in an offer despite the house, which was accepted. Inch Kenneth became theirs in 1967, lock stock and barrel. This impulse purchase had a profound influence on all their lives. Amongst other things, they all learnt how to manage a boat and milk a cow.

Although she has never painted on the island, she has made sketches and Inch Kenneth has been the inspiration for several of her paintings including the Crossings series. Although most of Yvonne's life has been London-based, it is curious that almost none of the work features London explicitly. The thread running through her painting is undoubtedly beautiful places as a backdrop of dramatic times.

YVONNE ROSALIND BARLOW

Born:

London, 10 September 1924 (Swiss father, English mother)

Studied:

Central School of Art; Chelsea School of Art; London University

After leaving University worked with Mass Observation, a social research organisation which gathered data on everyday life in Britain from 1937-1950.

Taught for several years at a special school for handicapped children in South London.

She was part of that group of artists, writers, doctors, musicians and eccentrics who lived and worked in Bloomsbury including such diverse talents as Colin Davis, John Berger, Fritz Spiegel and Quentin Crisp.

She has worked mainly in oil, but her works include pen-and-ink sketches, watercolours and gouache.

Group exhibitions:

- Royal Academy of Arts, London
- Paris Salon
- Whitechapel Art Gallery, London
- London Group
- Artists International Association
- Ellingham Mill Art Society, Suffolk
- Kettering Art Gallery

Solo exhibitions:

- Upper Grosvenor Gallery, London
(January 1964): Paintings, 'Pillage' collages which attracted attention from national media.
- Christopher Hull Gallery, Fulham, London
(July 1981): Paintings, drawings.
- Christopher Hull Gallery, Motcomb St, London
(February 1989): Paintings 'Encounters'
- Christopher Hull Gallery
(February 1995): Paintings 'Crossing the water'
- Wolfson College, Oxford
- Churchill College, Cambridge
(1984): Paintings, including 'Atlantis' – a 24ft painting on four panels, depicting the aftermath of a great disaster.
Abstract, painted in umbers, ochres and siennas.
- Christ's College, Cambridge (1987)

She has paintings in many private collections in America, Switzerland, Zimbabwe, Canada, France, Italy and throughout the United Kingdom. Paintings on public display include the University Library, Cambridge (portrait of Nora Barlow), and Churchill College, Cambridge.



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45 Albemarle Street
London W1S 4JL
Tel: +44 (0)20 7495 1010

info@belgraviagallery.com



BELGRAVIA
GALLERY

19th Floor Silver Fortune Plaza
1 Wellington Street, Central Hong Kong
Tel: +852 9222 7315

www.belgraviagallery.com